



Department
for Education

Improving adult basic digital skills

Government consultation

Launch date 18 October 2018

Respond by 10 January 2019

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Introduction

In the 2017 UK Digital Strategy, we set out an ambition for everyone to have the core digital skills they need to fully participate in society. Skills remain a key barrier preventing adults from participating in an increasingly online digital world. The latest basic digital skills survey, undertaken by Ipsos Mori and commissioned by Lloyds Banking Group, estimates that 11.3 million adults in the UK do not have the full range of basic digital skills and 4.3 million have no basic digital skills at all.¹ Other key barriers preventing adults from benefiting from the opportunities the digital world offers include:

- access: the ability to connect to the internet and go online;
- confidence: a fear of crime, lack of trust or not knowing where to start online;
- motivation: understanding why using the internet is relevant and helpful.²

Those without basic digital skills are also more likely to be vulnerable or disadvantaged: the Lloyds survey found that people with a registered disability are four times as likely to be offline and half of retired adults do not have secure basic digital skills. In the workplace, Lloyds found that 5.4 million working adults do not have the full range of basic digital skills.¹

As the world becomes increasingly digital, inequalities deepen for those who are not online and who do not possess basic digital skills. Those without basic digital skills:

- are less likely to progress in their careers – it has been predicted that within 20 years, 90% of all jobs will require some element of digital skills;²
- miss out on significant savings from transacting online – being online saves consumers an average of £744 a year;³
- risk exclusion as social interaction and communication increasingly takes place online, with research suggesting that 81% of people over 55 think being online makes them feel part of modern society and 72% say being online had helped reduce their feelings of isolation.⁴

¹ Lloyds (2018), 'Consumer Digital Index' - <https://www.lloydsbank.com/banking-with-us/whats-happening/consumer-digital-index.asp> - measures basic digital skills according to capability in 5 skills areas (Managing Information, Communicating, Transacting, Problem Solving, Creating)

² DCMS (2017), 'Digital skills and inclusion - giving everyone access to the digital skills they need' - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-digital-strategy/2-digital-skills-and-inclusion-giving-everyone-access-to-the-digital-skills-they-need>

³ Ipsos Mori (2017), 'Basic Digital Skills UK Report 2017' – <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/basic-digital-skills-uk-report-2017>

⁴ Digital Unite (2011), 'Being online can improve the lives of the over 55s' – <https://www.digitalunite.com/sites/default/files/files/Research%20shows%20being%20online%20can%20improve%20the%20lives%20of%20the%20over%2055s.pdf>

To help tackle digital exclusion through skills, in January 2018 Anne Milton, Minister of State for Apprenticeships and Skills, announced the introduction of full funding for adults who need them to take basic digital skills courses from 2020. Adults will have the opportunity to undertake improved digital courses based on new national standards setting out the digital skills people need to get on in life and work.⁵

This offer of full funding for learners to take digital training to a specific skills level has been set out in primary legislation for England (Digital Economy Act 2017), mirroring that of the English and maths legal entitlements.

The new entitlement will be funded through the national Adult Education Budget (AEB). In devolved areas, Mayoral Combined Authorities and the Greater London Authority will need to make provision for the funding of the digital entitlement as part of their devolution deal alongside the English and maths statutory entitlements.

More broadly, these reforms are part of the wider Government commitment to boost the supply of digital skills across the economy. We will achieve this through a strong focus on digital skills in compulsory education, in the general workforce and through development of the specialist digital skills we need to maintain our world leading digital sector.

In schools we have made computing a statutory national curriculum subject, and introduced a new Computer Science GCSE and A Level. We are also embedding digital skills into the standards for new apprenticeships and T Levels, where appropriate, as well as supporting the development of dedicated digital apprenticeships and T Levels.

To coordinate digital skills programmes and to improve coherence of digital skills provision at both national and local level, last year we established the Digital Skills Partnership to bring together Government, businesses, charities and voluntary organisations to make sure people have the right skills for the jobs in their area and are aware of all the digital training opportunities on offer.

⁵ DfE (2018), 'Anne Milton: speech at Bett show 2018' - <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/anne-milton-speech-at-bett-show-2018>

Who this is for

This consultation is for anybody with an interest in improving basic digital skills for adults, including:

- Education and training providers, including Further Education colleges, independent training providers, adult and community education providers;
- Teachers and tutors;
- Subject experts;
- Learners;
- Employers;
- Business sector;
- Awarding organisations;
- Third sector organisations;
- Libraries and other delivery/representative organisations.

Issue date

The consultation was issued on 18 October 2018.

Enquiries

If your enquiry is related to the policy content of the consultation you can contact the team on basicdigitalskills.consultation@education.gov.uk

If your enquiry is related to the DfE e-consultation website or the consultation process in general, you can contact the DfE Ministerial and Public Communications Division by email: Consultations.Coordinator@education.gov.uk or by telephone: 0370 000 2288 or via the [DfE Contact us page](#).

Additional copies

Additional copies are available electronically and can be downloaded from [GOV.UK DfE consultations](#).

The response

The results of the consultation and the Department's response will be [published on GOV.UK](#) in Spring 2019.

About this consultation

We welcome your views on our plans to improve basic digital skills training for adults by:

- Updating the national standards for the basic digital skills needed for life and work;
- Improving basic digital skills qualifications;
- Introducing a national entitlement to basic digital skills training, mirroring the existing legal entitlements for English and maths.

In particular we welcome views on:

i) **New national standards for basic digital skills**

- Do you agree that basic digital skills qualifications should be offered at two skills levels: 'beginner' (entry levels 1-3) and 'essential' (level 1) to comprise the minimum required for work and life?
- Do you agree with the proposed five skills categories (handling information; creating and editing digital content; communicating; transacting; being safe and responsible online)?
- Do you agree the draft standards capture the necessary basic digital skills for life, work and further study?
- Should the standards be reviewed at least every three years?

ii) **Improving basic digital skills qualifications**

- Do you agree that basic digital skills qualifications delivered by providers as part of the publicly funded adult education offer should:
 - Have a declared purpose?
 - Be of a minimum size?
 - Conform to a specific subject sector area (SSA) classification?

iii) **Introducing a national entitlement to basic digital skills training**

- Do you agree that:
 - Learners should be fully funded to take courses up to and including 'essential' level (level 1)?
 - Providers should carry out a thorough initial assessment to determine an individual's current level, based on the new national standards, to determine if the individual should be fully funded?
- Do you have any examples of best practice for initial assessments for basic digital skills?

We would like to hear your views on our proposals.

Respond online

To help us analyse the responses please use the online system wherever possible. Visit www.education.gov.uk/consultations to submit your response.

Other ways to respond

If for exceptional reasons you are unable to use the online system, for example because you use specialist accessibility software that is not compatible with the system, you may email us for a word document version of the form and email it or post it.

By email

basicdigitalskills.consultation@education.gov.uk

By post

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2nd Floor, 2 St. Paul's Place
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Deadline

The consultation closes 10 January 2019.

1. New national standards for basic digital skills

Basic digital skills are essential for adults to actively participate and thrive in an increasingly digital society. The evolution of the internet and online activity has had, and continues to have, a profound impact on the way we communicate, interact with, and perceive the world around us, both in our personal lives and at work.

The existing national ICT standards, published in 2006, are out-of-date and do not reflect the digital, connected world we live in. We have therefore developed new national standards (Annex 1) which set out the range of basic digital skills that adults need to fully participate in life, to undertake the significant majority of jobs, and engage in further study.

The draft standards are designed to provide a clear basis for the development of digital skills starting with the essentials all adults need, and supporting learners to progress, as recommended in the *Review of publicly funded digital skills qualifications*, chaired by Liz Williams, Director of Tech Literacy and Education Programmes at BT.⁶

The standards are designed for use by awarding organisations and providers to inform the development of basic digital skills curricula, qualifications and courses for adults. They are also intended for use by teachers and tutors who provide training and support for adults seeking to improve their basic digital skills. They may be of use to employers in defining the skills required for job roles. They have not been written for use by learners.

Developing the standards

The draft standards have been developed in close consultation with a range of providers, awarding organisations and digital inclusion organisations. We are very grateful for the support and involvement of over fifty stakeholders at workshops that took place over the summer to review the draft standards as they developed.

The draft standards are based on the Essential Digital Skills Framework⁷ which defines the skills needed to safely benefit from, participate in, and contribute to the digital world today and in the future.

Since 2015, the Framework has been used to benchmark the level of digital capability and exclusion across the UK. It is used across Adult Community Learning and Further

⁶ DfE (2016), 'Review of publicly funded digital skills qualifications' - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-publicly-funded-digital-skills-qualifications>

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/essential-digital-skills-framework>

Education settings and has strong support from employers and digital inclusion organisations. The Tech Partnership and Lloyds Banking Group recently consulted widely on updates to the Framework – the first since its original publication in 2015. Changes made were subject to wide consultation across employers, charities, national and local government departments, academics and individuals. Following closure of the Tech Partnership, ownership of the Essential Digital Skills Framework now rests with the Crown.

The draft standards are also informed by a range of existing national and international standards from Europe (DigComp 2.0⁸, Norway) and elsewhere in the UK (e.g. Essential Skills Wales, Scottish Core Skills).

a) New national standards

Proposal to introduce standards with two levels

The new draft national standards (Annex 1) differ from the existing national standards in two ways. Firstly, entry levels (entry level 1, entry level 2 and entry level 3) are combined to form a single entry level, referred to as ‘beginner’; and secondly, level 2 skills statements are excluded.

The two levels proposed are:

- **‘beginner’** – designed for adults with little or no prior experience of using digital devices or the internet. This ‘beginner’ level equates to entry levels (entry level 1, entry level 2 and entry level 3) in the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) level descriptors.⁹ Examples of topics include using a search engine, sending and receiving online communications, completing and submitting online forms and protecting personal information and privacy; and
- **‘essential’** – designed for adults with some experience of using digital devices and the internet but lacking secure basic digital skills. The ‘essential’ level equates to level 1 and aims to set out the knowledge and skills required to undertake the full range of digital tasks typically needed in life and work in an informed and safe manner. Examples of topics include evaluating online content, taking steps to manage online identity, and understanding and exercising personal rights for controlling use of personal data.

⁸ DigComp was developed by the Joint Research Centre (JRC) of the European Commission.

⁹ Ofqual (2015) Qualification and Component Levels -

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/461637/qualification-and-component-levels.pdf

We are proposing these two levels following a mapping of basic digital skills based on the RQF level descriptors up to and including level 2. This exercise found that in order to differentiate between the three entry levels, some digital tasks would need to be broken down into components which would not reflect the way a skill is typically taught or learned.

For example, teachers generally teach a learner how to enter and save text in a document (entry level 1) at the same time as editing and formatting the text (entry level 2). They are also likely to teach different applications to use for entering, editing and formatting text (entry level 3) in the same course.

The mapping also found that most skills classified as level 2 in the 2006 standards should be reclassified at level 1 or below. This is due to advances in the ease of use of digital devices and applications that have made them more natural and instinctive to navigate and use. As a result, many digital tasks now require fewer steps to complete and are less likely to require users to pre-learn procedures and have prior knowledge. For example, tasks previously perceived as complex, such as initiating a video call or taking and editing a digital image, no longer require specialist applications and can be achieved simply on a wide range of digital devices.

By setting out two skills levels – ‘beginner’ and ‘essential’ – basic digital skills are described in full at each level. This results in distinct progression between the two levels and provides a strong basis for teaching and assessment. This will help adults to get the essential digital skills they need up to and including level 1. We will keep this under review as the level of digital skills that people need changes.

Skills areas and statements

The standards are set out in five skills areas:

1. Handling information
2. Creating and editing digital content
3. Communicating
4. Transacting
5. Being safe and responsible online

These skills areas reflect the significant changes over the past decade in the way we use and apply digital skills and technology, such as:

- Digital technology is increasingly present in all aspects of life and work;
- Mobile and on-the-go connectivity means that we, and our data, are increasingly online;

- Everyday activities such as social participation, communication, commerce and public services are increasingly taking place 'online', with those 'offline' ever more disadvantaged.

The skill statements which make up the draft standards are intended, as far as possible to represent a distinct, independent skill and aim to be coherent both across the two levels (progression within a skill) and down the columns (skills statements within each level align across the skills areas). Each skills statement is intentionally brief and accompanied by amplification notes that set out the parameters of each skill and underpinning knowledge required. Where the skills statements themselves are self-explanatory, no amplification is provided. A glossary is also provided to support consistent interpretation of common terms across the standards.

The draft standards use plain English whenever possible and technical language only when required to define and differentiate skills at each level. Care has also been taken to ensure coherence and consistency with literacy and numeracy skills. Where literacy and/or numeracy skills are required to achieve a basic digital skill, these are set at least at the level below that of the digital skill. This will ensure the focus remains on the learner's development of the digital skill, rather than testing their literacy and/or numeracy ability.

b) Foundation skills

There are over four million adults in the UK who do not have any basic digital skills.¹⁰ Such adults may need support to handle and use digital devices for the first time and to learn the following foundation skills:

- Turning on a device (including entering and updating any account information safely, such as password);
- Using the available controls on a device (such as a mouse and keyboard for a computer, or touchscreen on a smartphone or tablet);
- Making use of accessibility tools (including assistive technology) to make devices easier to use (such as changing display settings to make content easier to read);
- Interacting with the home screen on a device;

¹⁰ Lloyds (2018), 'Consumer Digital Index' - <https://www.lloydsbank.com/banking-with-us/whats-happening/consumer-digital-index.asp> -measures basic digital skills according to capability in 5 skills areas (Managing Information, Communicating, Transacting, Problem Solving, Creating)

- Connecting to the internet (including wifi) safely and securely, and open a browser;
- Opening and accessing an application on a device.

These foundation skills are at pre-entry level and therefore, while not part of the standards themselves, need to be considered as an important prerequisite for some adult learners.

c) Keeping the standards relevant and up-to-date

To ensure the standards remain relevant, we propose that they are reviewed at least every three years. This will ensure that the standards continue to reflect the full range of basic digital skills needed to participate actively in life, work and society.

Regular review of the standards will also mean evolutionary changes to standards rather than major updates such as those proposed in this consultation.

To ensure the full engagement of digital skills and inclusion partners, the Department for Education will involve the Digital Skills Partnership in future reviews of the standards and the underpinning Essential Digital Skills framework.

Consultation Questions

1. Do you agree that basic digital skills qualifications should be offered at two skills levels: 'beginner' (entry level) and 'essential' (level 1) to comprise the minimum required for work and life?
2. Do you agree with the five skills categories (handling information; creating and editing digital content; communicating; transacting; being safe and responsible online)?
3. Do you agree that the draft standards capture the basic digital skills needed to fully participate in:
 - life
 - to undertake the significant majority of jobs; and
 - encourage further study?
4. Do you agree the standards should be reviewed at least every three years?

2. Improving the publicly funded basic digital skills offer

As announced earlier this year, from 2020 adults 19 and over who lack basic digital skills will be able to access specified basic digital skills training free of charge, where it is made available by providers as part of the publicly funded adult education offer. This will mirror the approach taken for adult literacy and numeracy training.¹¹

Eligibility Principles

We will require providers to enrol eligible adults on reformed basic digital skills qualifications that meet three principles. These principles will work in tandem with regulatory oversight from Ofqual to encourage the development of a high quality and relevant basic digital skills offer for adults which represents value for money. These eligibility principles are:

- 1. Declared purpose:** We expect qualifications to support adults in gaining the essential digital skills and underpinning knowledge needed in life, work and further study. The reformed qualifications will be primarily studied by adults aged 19 and over. Each qualification must have an accompanying statement that clearly describes who the qualification is for, what basic digital skills the qualification covers, and what further study or employment the qualification is designed to lead to. This will help learners make informed decisions about which qualification to take.
- 2. Size:** Qualifications must be at least 45 guided learning hours, the same threshold in place for the publicly funded English and maths qualifications.
- 3. Sector Subject Area classification:** We will also require all publicly funded basic digital skills qualifications to be recorded under Sector Subject Area (SSA) 6.2 ICT for users. Currently, basic digital skills qualifications sit under a range of sector subject areas. Requiring qualifications to sit under a single sector subject area classification will affirm their purpose.

Consultation Questions

5. Do you agree with the three proposed qualification eligibility principles (declared purpose, size and sector subject area classification)? If not, please explain why.

¹¹ DfE (2014), 'Qualifications: eligible for public funding' - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/qualifications-getting-approval-for-funding>

3. Introducing a national entitlement

The final section of this consultation sets out the following proposals for the introduction and operation of the new entitlement:

- a) Setting the skills level
- b) Publishing a list of approved qualifications
- c) Initial assessments

a) Setting the skills level

The Digital Economy Act 2017 makes provision for the Secretary of State to set the entitlement at the skills level which demonstrates ‘the minimum required in that respect by persons aged 19 or over in order to be able to operate effectively in day-to-day life.’¹²

For the reasons set out in Section 1, we propose that publicly funded digital skills courses should be offered up to and including the ‘essential’ level (level 1). As is the case for English and maths through the study of ‘stepping stone’ qualifications, we will support progression to the ‘essential’ level by funding learners to undertake ‘beginner’ qualifications.

In the longer term, as the digital skills required for work change and evolve, we will also consider extending the entitlement to fully fund adults to undertake digital skills courses at level 2.

In the interim, level 2 digital skills qualifications remain eligible for funding where they meet criteria for inclusion in the level 2 entitlement or in the broader AEB ‘local flexibility’ offer.

b) Publishing a list of approved qualifications

In advance of introducing the entitlement in 2020, we will publish a list of qualifications eligible to be included in the digital entitlement offer, alongside those specified for English and maths.¹³

For a qualification to be approved as part of the entitlement offer, awarding organisations will need to submit qualifications developed on the new national

¹² National Archives (2017), ‘Digital Economy Act 2017’ - <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/30/section/114/enacted>

¹³ DfE (2014), ‘Qualifications: eligible for public funding’ - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/qualifications-getting-approval-for-funding>

standards for consideration against the qualification eligibility principles. Further details on this process will be confirmed in due course.

c) Initial assessments

In order that we fund only those adults who do not have secure basic digital skills, we plan to require providers to implement an initial assessment as part of the AEB funding and performance rules for basic digital skills. Providers will need to carry out a thorough initial assessment to determine an individual's current skills level using an assessment tool based on the new national basic digital skills standards.

We propose that providers should be required to enrol the learner on a level above that at which they were assessed and be able to provide evidence of this. This is the same approach we currently adopt to fund learners to take English and maths qualifications as part of the legal entitlement, as we require providers to:

- Carry out a thorough initial assessment to determine an individual's current skills level using assessment tools based on the national literacy and numeracy standards and core curriculums;
- Enrol the learner on a level above that at which they were assessed and be able to provide evidence of this;
- Deliver ongoing assessment to support learning;
- Record the evidence of all assessment outcomes in the learner file.

Mapping of initial assessments for basic digital skills found few initial assessments for basic digital skills that would meet the proposed AEB funding rules. We would welcome examples of best practice and plan to work with initial assessment providers to encourage the development of assessments ahead of the entitlement starting in 2020.

Consultation Questions

6. Do you agree that publicly funded courses should be offered up to and including 'essential' level (level 1) as part of the legal entitlement?
7. Do you agree that providers should carry out a thorough initial assessment to determine whether an individual should be fully funded to undertake a basic digital skills course?
8. Do you have any examples of best practice for initial assessments for basic digital skills?

Equality assessment

In accordance with the Equality Act 2010, Ministers must have “due regard”, when making decisions, to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination; advance equality of opportunity; and foster good relations, in relation to protected characteristics. The protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, marriage and civil partnership, and pregnancy and maternity. We have been taking this requirement into account in developing national digital standards.

We are particularly conscious that basic digital skills courses play an important role in equipping adults with learning difficulties and disabilities with the skills they need for life and work. They are also taken by some young people with Special Educational Needs.

We will use answers from these work to inform final decisions on these reforms and to undertake an equality impact assessment.

Consultation Questions

9. Do any of the proposals have the potential to have a disproportionately positive impact on specific learner groups, in particular the 'protected characteristic' groups and young people with Special Educational Needs?
10. Do any of the proposals have the potential to have a disproportionately negative impact on specific learner groups, in particular the 'protected characteristic' groups and young people with Special Educational Needs? If yes, how can this be reduced?

Ofqual consultation

Whilst responsibility for specifying the national standards lies with the Department for Education, responsibility for the regulation of their associated qualifications lies with Ofqual, the regulator for qualifications, examinations and assessments in England.

Ofqual will shortly be consulting on approaches to assessment and regulation of the new basic digital skills qualifications. This will include aspects such as the approach to titling the qualifications, coverage of the draft national standards and the structure of the qualifications.

Respondents may wish to formulate their views in light of the proposals across both the Department for Education and Ofqual consultations.

Please indicate in your response if you will be responding to both consultations.



Department
for Education

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